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GOD's Universal GOODNESS
D I S P L A Y E D;
I N A
D I S C O U R S E

Delivered to a
Society of FREE ENQUIRERS,
B Y A
MEMBER of that CHURCH
Which is as old as the Creation.

(Price One Shilling and Sixpence.)

17

GOD'S Universal Goodness

DISPLAYED

IN A

COURSE

Delivered to a

Society of Free Enquirers



MEMBER OF THE CHURCH

Which is as old as the Creation.

By the Rev. John G. ...

GOD's Universal GOODNESS
DISPLAYED; ¹⁶
IN A ⁴
DISCOURSE

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BY A
MEMBER of that CHURCH
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*Cum Bonitatem considero Dei, video nihil esse in me quod
illius gratuita beneficentia non debeam; et nullum arbitror
esse tantum crimen quod ille nolit ignoscere respicienti.*

Erasmus.

O thou first Cause, Eternal Love,
All things to thee their being owe,
All that in ambient air does move,
Or teems on fertile fields below,
Or sparkles in the skies above,
Or does in rolling waters flow,
Springs from the seed which thou didst sow.

Brit. Ench.

The Second EDITION.
To which is added a Letter to the Deists.

L O N D O N :

Printed and Sold for M. SHEEPEY, at the Royal-
Exchange; and R. DAVIS, the Corner of
Sackville-street, Piccadilly. 1751.

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Society of Free Enquirers,

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By permission of the Society of Free Enquirers, the following Discourse was delivered at the Anniversary Meeting of the Society, on the 14th of May, 1791.



Printed by J. Johnson, in Pall-mall.

The Second Edition.

To which is added a Letter to the Deists.

LONDON.

Printed and Sold by M. Sturges, at the Royal Exchange, and R. Dyer, in the Corner of St. Andrew's Church, Broad-street, 1791.

TO THE
Rev. JAMES FOSTER, D.D.

Rev. Sir,

YOU are celebrated as a rational christian, an eloquent orator, a judicious writer, a benevolent neighbour, and an honest man: Indued as you are with these rare accomplishments, whom more proper could I make choice of for a patron.

Upon the subject I have here handled, you have lately given the world an excellent discourse. In many points we concur; tho' in some important principles we differ widely; no wonder, since it is not for all men to see all things alike. But as you detest priestcraft, laugh at enthusiasm, abhor bigotry and superstition, and contend that every religious principle should be brought to the bar of human reason, freely to be examined; I could not avoid addressing to you a piece, which is calculated to expose artifice and folly in religion, and to promote free enquiry, and rational worship of the Deity. I wish, that all who are so inclined, would associate themselves for these great ends; and should rejoice to see that glorious day of light and liberty. Such toleration given and

enjoyed, could not be injurious to any government, but of benefit to all that mean well. These great ends are what I solely aim at in the publication of the following discourse; in which I think there is nothing repugnant to the strictest and most refined morality, and the most rational and sublime notions of Deity; but that on the contrary, it tends to rescue the character of the great and good God from the scandalous imputations of weak and wicked men.

The important truths inculcated in the following discourse, have at times been confessed, either directly or consequentially, by the most celebrated divines: And nothing but the rewards and dignities annexed to clerical christianity, prevents their being universally resounded from the pulpit with all the prevailing force of reason.

Mankind in all ages have been fond of mysteries. The most artful deceiver is always best rewarded. The multitude neglect plain truth, are captivated with the marvellous, and always admire what they do not understand. All this is owing to a wrong bias given them in their education, and to a corruption of their natural powers by art when they are young and tender. Thus in order to amuse the populace, the pagans introduced the doctrines of divine incubations, incarnations, demons, apparitions, and many other superstitious fooleries; by which they made great advantages of the simplicity and credulity

lity of the people. But representing the kind parent of the universe, as a jealous God, visiting the iniquities of the fathers upon the children, to the third and fourth generation, to whom no attonement could be made for transgressions without blood, is representing him in an odious and hateful light ; a height of blasphemy or stupidity this ! which only one nation in the world ever arrived at. Had the deluders of mankind taken half the pains to set them right, as they did to give them a wrong bias, mankind would have been rendered better and happier.

There is no wonder at all that deceit should flourish, and overspread the face of the earth like a deluge, when the *piâ fraudes*, or holy cheats have been ranked among the virtues ; when the priest and politician have clubbed to practise this dangerous maxim, *that it is necessary to deceive mankind to govern them* ; and when deceivers are high paid for the defence and support of deception.

If no man could find an interest in darkening TRUTH, it would every where prevail. From whence arose many religions in the world, but from the artifice of designing men, working on the weakness of the simple ? The advocates of every sect will acknowledge this to be a truth, and that there can be but one true religion in the world ; but where shall we find it if not in

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nature ? It must be either there, or no where. Many rays of the pure religion of uncorrupted nature, are to be met with, good Sir, in your excellent writings.

The most distinguishing mark or criterion of a religion is, *its being able to support itself by its own intrinsic worth and excellency.* True religion founded upon nature and reason, wants no violence to aid it. It insinuates itself, by opening the understanding, with irresistible evidence and delight. But false religion opposing nature and reason, conscious of her own weakness, always flies to the secular arm for protection. — If a gigantic man was to encounter a dwarf, would it not be ridiculous for him to call to his assistance two or three of his athletic neighbours ? Truth needs only freedom of enquiry and of reasoning. The one true religion of reason is, more than equal in disputation, to all the sophistry of all the false religions upon earth. It desires but liberty to discover itself. It needs only to shine by its own light ; and to be established by its own evidence and virtue. Such is the nature of truth. Did *Euclid* or his followers ever apply to the civil magistrate to defend the doctrines contained in his elements ? What should we say, were we to see an act of parliament setting forth, that if any one shall by writing, speaking, &c. deny that the square of the perpendicular, and the base of a right angled triangle, are equal to the square

square of the hypotenuse; or shall assert, that there are more than three angles in a triangle; or declare that a triangle is a circle; he shall be incapable of any office, and for the second offence shall suffer three years imprisonment. Should we not laugh at the weakness of such legislators? For whether doctrines are true or false, an act of parliament cannot make them otherwise than what they are. Therefore the teachers of any science (but that which is falsely called divinity) never desire to have their doctrines established by law, but by reason and demonstration: I say divinity falsely so called, for that which is not true, is not divinity. And there is a consciousness of *Falshood*, in the teachers of those doctrines, that want an act of parliament to establish them as *true*. They that do what is right, use right means; and will never have recourse to what are wrong; they will not use improper measures, to confirm the right. There is therefore sufficient reason to believe all *doctrines* are *false*, that require an act of parliament to make them true, or to be received as truth.

TRUE RELIGION requires no more violence to support it, no more guard to secure it, no more bulwarks to defend it, than the excellent piece of *geometry* before mentioned. Upon this account, when I see *religion* stand guarded round with the *fascies* and *lictors*, with military or civil ensigns, I immediately conclude, that she is a usurper, has

has played the tyrant, and thinks her person in danger if left without her janisaries, being conscious to herself, that she has no right to the authority she assumes. On the contrary NATURAL RELIGION charms by love, not constrains by fear: and her own native beauties, her own excellencies and perfections would be a sufficient defence for her, did not avarice and fraud continually join their force to exclude her native right. She is elegantly plain, whilst superstition like a harlot is dressed out in painted garments, false jewels, and tinsel ornaments.

It is plain, Rev. Sir, from your late treatise, that you are a lover of true religion, that of reason and nature. And it being this great principle I seek to advance, as the only means to make men wiser, better, and consequently happier; I am persuaded that though your judgment should condemn me in some points wherein we do not exactly agree, your candor will still acquit me on account of an honest intention. And being thus animated, I little regard the reproach of the interested, the rage of bigots, and the censure of the superstitious. But must own, that next to a desire of assisting the cause of truth and virtue, I have nothing so much at heart as the approbation of wise and good men like yourself; and am, *Reverend Sir,*

Your great admirer,

And most humble Servant,

The AUTHOR.

P S A L M cxlv. Verse 9.

*The Lord is good to all, and his
tender mercies are over all his
works.*

THESE words contain a truth, so evidently founded in the reason and nature of things, and so consonant to the experience of mankind in general, that not one person, amidst the various systems of religion that now divide the world, can reasonably object to it.

To have just and proper notions of the Deity, appears to me, to be the foundation of all true religion. My intention therefore in discoursing on the words above mentioned is, to exalt our ideas of the divine perfections, to excite in our minds a steady, uniform piety towards God, and the most universal benevolence towards our fellow-

creatures: this being the nearest approach to *perfection*, that we, in our present *imperfect* state, are capable of.

The *essence* of God, or the *mode* of his existence has ever been, and probably ever will remain a matter of dispute among the wisest men; but his *existence* is a truth so universally believed, that I shall bring no arguments to prove it. The *being* of God is proclaimed aloud through all his works, in the *minute*st of which, the traces of infinite power and wisdom so evidently appear, that every reasonable being who makes a due use of his faculties will immediately perceive, that no accidental co-operation of the various parts of matter (even supposing matter to be eternal) could possibly produce such admirable order and regularity: and he will be forced to resolve it into the omnipotence of a *first cause*, which we call God. But we must not stop here, for the bare belief of his existence carries in it no merit, as this truth strikes with irresistible force on the minds of intelligent beings, and constrains their assent; our business, our indispensable duty is to make the best use of those faculties God has given us, in an honest,

rest, free and impartial enquiry after truth ;
 an enquiry into the moral perfections of
 Deity, in order to find out what there is in
 God, that we may humbly imitate.

As to his incommunicable attributes, his
omnipotence, unity, immutability, eternity and
 the like, these represent him to us as the
 proper object of our adoration ; these proclaim
 him worthy of all, of infinitely more than all
 the homage and supreme regard, that can
 be paid him by angels or men ; but his *truth*,
 his *mercy* and universal *benevolence*, these
 it is our duty and our happiness to imitate :
 for we must first assimilate ourselves to the
 deity in rectitude, before we can reasona-
 bly hope to do it in bliss : In other words,
we must be pure in our measure as he is pure,
before we can be happy as he is happy : and
 so in all his other imitable perfections. But
 as his universal goodness (connected with
 infinite power and wisdom) seems to in-
 volve in it every other moral perfection,
 I have chose *that* as the subject of this dis-
 course, and shall recommend the imitation of
 it, as absolutely necessary to our happiness ;
 being well assured, there is nothing we can
 do so pleasing to God, nothing that can

yield us such solid and lasting satisfaction, as the communicating all the good in our power to our fellow-creatures. And if we could suppose the all-perfect Deity capable of receiving any additional delight or satisfaction, to that which necessarily arises from the rectitude of his own nature, it must be from the happiness he communicates to other beings; in order to promote which, *the Lord is good to all, and his tender mercies are over all his works.*

In discoursing farther on these words, I shall point out the various ways in which God is good to his creatures, and that under these four heads.

First, In Creation.

Secondly, In the discoveries he has made of himself to every intelligent being; from whence arises a knowledge of their duty to him, and to one another.

Thirdly, In his universal care of his creatures in the general course of his providence, And

Fourthly,

Fourthly, In the evils he permits to befall them, which in regard to sin, may be call'd *punishment*, but in regard to God, *goodness*; being intended to reform their manners, cure their distempered minds, and consequently to promote their happiness. After which I purpose drawing some natural inferences, from each of those heads, by way of application.

First, then, I am to prove that God is good to all in the act of creation; and this will readily appear, if we consider him as a being possess'd of all possible perfection, and so infinitely happy, from the rectitude of his whole nature, that the existence of other beings could not possibly encrease his happiness. What an illustrious idea is this of the divine goodness! He had no ends primarily relative to his own happiness to answer; no *conceivable* motive for bringing us and every other order of intelligent beings into existence, but to communicate happiness to us and them.

But the divine goodness will farther appear in the act of creation, from his having made us *intelligent*, and consequently *free* beings;
for

for every intelligent being must have a power of comparing one thing with another, and of preferring that which appears most conducive to his happiness; without such a freedom of action as this is, neither virtue or vice could be attributed to us, nor should we be accountable beings. “ *God would not* “ (as an author observes) *employ his almighty power to force us to be happy; because* “ *he would give us the eternal pleasure of* “ *contributing to our own happiness,*” which will probably in a great measure result from a consciousness of having done all in our power, towards the discharge of those duties, that necessarily arise from the relation we stand in to God and to one another.

Again, God is good to all his *intelligent* creatures, in having made them with immortal souls capable of enjoying to eternity pleasures suited to their most enlarged capacities; and also, in his having strongly implanted in the human mind a consciousness of this never-ceasing existence; in order that the prospect of future happiness might cheer and relieve the soul under all its pressures here.

Secondly, I am to prove that God is good to all, in the discoveries he hath made of him-

himself to intelligent beings ; from whence arises a knowledge of their duty to him and to one another. And under this head it may be expected, that I should principally consider the goodness of God, in the discoveries he hath made of himself by the holy gospel ; the vast, the unbounded goodness of the Deity, in sending his only begotten son to declare his will to mankind ; and also to die for a world of creatures who had forfeited their allegiance to God, and were rendered the proper objects of his eternal vengeance by the sin of *Adam* ; and whom, consistent with his justice he could not pardon, without infinite atonement and satisfaction being made him by a person (I must not say a being) equal to himself. But as the christian system is confined to a very narrow part of the world, and the advantages of it enjoyed by very few, compared with the whole ; and as I am (agreeable to my text) to prove the *universality* of God's goodness, I must attempt it on principles of reason, and endeavor to shew that he has *really* been good to *all*, in this particular ; namely, the having made such clear discoveries of himself by the *light of*

nature, that every reasonable being who duly attends to this *light*, and who makes the best use of his faculties in an honest enquiry, may, without any other assistance, be well acquainted with his duty; the practice of which will render him a proper object of the divine favor. Indeed how can I associate in my mind, widely different ideas of God, and join them in one discourse? Such as those of an *omnipotent*, *immutable*, infinitely *wise* and good *being*, and those low and groveling ideas with which some part of the scripture would possess the human mind; namely, of a Deity, in six Days making a world, and then *resting* from the laborious task, * and being *refreshed*! that the first intelligent agent which he brought upon this new stage, yielded to the very first temptation that offered itself! and damned all his posterity by one act of disobedience! Tragical indeed! that God in a few years should repent he had made the world at all! that he should then destroy it, and try a second time to make a more tractable race of creatures! that

* Exod. xxxi. 17.

that to these he gave *positive written laws*, but *they* answered not the end proposed; for we are told, *that they were laws and statutes which were not good* *. It may be meant that they did not make mankind wiser and better; that after this, *these* laws were repeated, and others were given of a very different kind, and more worthy of the Deity. But then this *written law* was given in a language that a very small part of the christian world understands; and it has passed through the hands of various translators, who probably through ignorance have mistaken, or for interest have corrupted many parts of it, and to support the power of the priests, have rendered it dark and unintelligible, creating disputes, persecutions and much bloodshed among mankind, as if it were to fulfil that saying of *Jesus Christ*, namely, *that he was not come to bring peace on earth but a sword: and to set the nearest relations, and dearest friends at variance* †. I shall instance only in these four words, THIS IS MY BODY, which have been the means of spilling the innocent blood of thousands. I say how can I associate these ideas of the di-

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divine

* Ezek. xx. 25.

† Math. x. 34.

vine Being (as also those of his being *angry, revengeful*, threat'ning eternal damnation to his creatures ; and again being rendered *placable* by the death of an innocent person) with the natural notions we have of God, as a Being possess'd of all possible perfection, and whose happiness can neither be augmented or diminished by the rectitude or obliquity of the actions of his creatures ? Therefore it will be no way suitable to join these incompatible notions together in this discourse. And yet after all, I think the *scripture* contains some *great and noble* sentiments of the Deity, and many important truths ; many rational and sublime doctrines and precepts, every way worthy of God for their author ; and which most certainly were derived from him, as the fountain of all truth and moral fitness, though not communicated in a *supernatural* way. But upon the whole, these truths are so blended, so confounded with mysteries and unintelligible propositions, that conjunctly considered, they cannot properly be called a *divine revelation* : The wisest and most learned, the best and most religious men, are eternally disputing about the true meaning of the *mysterious and inexplicable*

and therefore *super-rational* parts of the bible, which after the best use of my faculties, I must object to, as not being divinely inspired, or the immediate *supernatural* produce of a divine inspiration. Sometimes the scripture must be taken literally, sometimes allegorically, and at other times the vulgar translation, and the original text, differ like light and darkness; how then shall a man, though he may have a good share of natural understanding, find out the moral perfections of the Deity, how be sure of a true knowledge of his duty, from consulting those mysterious oracles? The answer I should give to the important enquiry, would be this: Continue no longer to seek for light in obscurity, but open the book of nature which contains the pure and perfect will and word of God, and by a due use of your faculties, you will clearly perceive whatever is necessary for you to know and practise.

This brings me back (after a long, though I think necessary digression) to my second general head, namely, to prove the goodness of God in the discoveries he has made of himself to *rational* beings, from whence

arises a knowledge of their duty to him, and to one another.

That God has revealed himself to rational beings in all ages, and in every part of the known world, appears from the concurrent testimony of the most eminent heathen writers, and from the general consent of all nations. *Tully* says, as quoted by bishop *Wilkins*, *Amongst all mankind there is no nation so wild and barbarous, who though they may mistake in their due apprehension of the nature of God, do not yet acknowledge his Being.* And again, *There is no nation so immensely barbarous and savage, as not to believe the existence of a Deity, and by some kind of services express their adoration of him.* So *Seneca* *Epist.* 118, *There is no where any nation so utterly lost to all things of law and morality, as not to believe the existence of a God.* And our *Dr. Cudworth* has written a most learned and elaborate treatise, to prove the universality of the notion of one God; and asserts that the *Pagans* believed their eternal Gods were derived from one self-existent Deity. But notwithstanding the assertions of these great men, some say there are people in the world,

world, who have no idea of any supreme Being. If so, they certainly have not that ray of divinity, which principally distinguishes mankind from the brute creation: and as *Quintilian* seems to think in his *Institut. Orat. Lib. i.* that irrational men are excrescencies of nature, and not above brutes, though in the form of men. He says, *reason is natural to man. As birds by nature fly, as the steed is rapid in the race, and as savages are fierce and cruel; so thought and wisdom are proper to us: wherefore the origin of the mind is believed to be celestial: But blockheads and fools incapable of instruction, are no more according to nature, than monstrous and prodigious bodies.* And *Tully*, more than once in his writings, discovers the same sentiments of the irrational part of mankind; but what the state of such will be hereafter, God only knows: and all our enquiries about it are vain and fruitless. It is sufficient to my present purpose, that every rational being who will duly attend to the dictates of his own mind, and make a proper use of his faculties, will not only perceive the Being of a God, but will also discover the relation he stands in to him;

him; and as, from this discovery, his duty will appear, so it will also appear, that the practice of it is the only way to happiness.

Our duty towards God, and towards our fellow-creatures, appears to me then, to be founded in the reason and nature of things, and the knowledge of it attainable by the *light of nature*, without any other assistance; and I think it will also appear, to every candid examiner from a short, though natural train of reasoning, thus.

That this world and every creature in it, derived their existence from an omnipotent first cause; is clear to us, from the apparent impossibility of our coming into *being*, without the concurrence of such an almighty, self-existing power. If God be then omnipotent, he must also be infinite in wisdom, because omnipotence must include in its infinite *copia*, a power of perception, of knowing every thing fit and proper to be done; a power to contrive, as well as to execute. If God perceives every thing that is fit and proper to be done, and has uncontrollable power to execute the same, it naturally follows, that he is infinitely good; for as he hath
nothing

nothing to fear (says a learned author) *not to be good, would be not to be wise*: and as infinite power, wisdom and goodness must include every other attribute, we clearly perceive, that this *first cause* is possessed of all possible perfection; and consequently, must have been from all eternity infinitely happy; and could not receive any new accession of *good* from the existence of any other being; nor could he have any conceivable motive, for bringing us and every other order of intelligent beings into existence, but to communicate happiness to us and them. He then is the kind, the tender parent of the universe, and we and all mankind are his offspring. From hence the relation between God and man, and between one man and another is discovered at one view; for if we are all children of the same almighty parent, we are brethren: The relations then being discovered, the duty that arises (as all duty does) from these relations, will also appear. And first of our duty to God.

Is God then our father? hath he brought us into being only to make us happy? hath he given us powers and faculties, the due use of which will procure us this intended happiness?

ness? What vast obligations are we under to him? how can we enough acknowledge his goodness to us? We will bless him while we live, we will bless him when we come to die; and we desire to adore and praise him in every state of existence throughout an endless eternity. We will be patient under all our afflictions, well knowing that his chastisement proceeds from his love. We know that he can gain nothing by our services, our goodness extends not unto him: and this we also know, this we are sure *nature* teaches us, *that an humble imitation of him in his moral perfections*, is our duty and our happiness.

Thus our duty to God appears from the relation we stand in to him: Now let us consider our duty to our fellow-creatures; and this too arises from the relation we stand in to them.

Did God bring all our brethren, as well as us, into being to make us all happy? We ought humbly to imitate his goodness, and do all in our power to carry on this infinitely great and benevolent scheme, by being well affected towards all mankind, and by using our best endeavours to promote their happiness. Our justice should be inflexible, our cha-

charity diffusive, and our benevolence unbounded; and if this conduct was universally pursued, if it was a constant, invariable rule with us, *to do to others, as we would they should do unto us in the same circumstances*; we should well nigh shut all *moral* evil out of the world; together with a greater variety of *natural*, than at first view can possibly occur to our perception; since many of those evils we are wont to look on as *natural* or accidental, and which we are now subject to, and frequently afflicted with, may probably be permitted by God as punishments, when we deviate from the rule of *right*; and is indeed generally connected with vice, in order (no doubt) to cure us of vicious habits, and affright us back into the paths of virtue and happiness.

Thus I think I have shewn, that the relations we stand in to God and man, the duties that arise from these relations, and the happiness that results from the performance of those duties, are discoverable by the light of nature only. This is that original *revelation* which God hath implanted in the constitution of every rational being, namely, a power of distinguishing *right* from *wrong*, which

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hath this advantage above every written revelation (or what is so called) in the world, that we can readily trace it back to its divine original. This we know must come from God, or we know not that we are his creatures. It has passed through no translator's hands, who through ignorance might mistake, or for interest might corrupt it. It is the same in all languages, in all places, and at all times; being written with the finger of God on the hearts of all his intelligent creatures: and it must eternally remain absolutely sufficient to answer the ends of God's government, and to discover to rational beings their duty, as long as God remains the father of the universe, and we his intelligent offspring. For as all duty results from the relations we stand in to God, and to one another, if these relations be invariable, and eternally the same, (as most certainly they are) then the same original law will eternally serve for the rule of our conduct: But if we can suppose that these relations are precarious and uncertain, and that God should in a course of years perceive *new* relations, which were unperceivable by him at first, then a *new* revelation of his will would be certainly necessary. But this cannot

cannot be supposed ; and the same arguments that would prove more than one revelation necessary, would as well prove the necessity of one thousand ; for the first must be deficient only for want of wisdom in the law-giver, to adapt it to the various situations, dispositions and capacities of his creatures. And if God could not foresee how creatures would act, and for that reason could not make a law at first, that would answer the ends of his government ; it clearly appears, that he never could be sure that any other would, and he might be continually making alterations in it. And what in fact do those insinuate, who plead the necessity of a new revelation ? but that the first would not answer the purposes intended by God, and accuse him of weakness and inability, to give at once a perfect and compleat system, which would eternally answer all his designs, in the government of his Creatures.

If our being *free agents* was the reason why God could not do this, *that* reason will continue, as long as our *freedom* continues : for if it be in the power of free agents to frustrate the designs of their Maker at any time, they then act independent of him,

and may do so at all times : and if he could not originally give a law, fit to be the guide of their actions, he never could be sure of doing it at all ; and the representing God as mending, or new-making his laws, certainly implies an imperfection in him, and seems to put him on a level with the fallible and mistaken governors of this world.

If every thing that is fit and proper to be done, do not always appear to God ; it never may appear to him at all : for as all things proceed from him, he must be as intimately acquainted with his own productions at one time, as at another. If the rays of his wisdom penetrate through all nature, if all the powers and faculties of the soul and body are derived from him, as the fountain of all being ; he must surely be capable of making one general revelation of himself, which would eternally answer the ends of his government, and the infinitely kind purpose of his creation, namely, to make his creatures happy. And that he has made such a revelation of himself to mankind in all ages, I think most evidently appears. What then, O God, should we desire more? Thou hast given us to know, whatever is necessary to promote
our

our happiness; nor could the most exalted being in heaven, thy peculiar favourite, (if thou hast any such) do more for us, though, commissioned by thee, he should leave the mansions of eternal bliss to live and die among us. Adored then be the eternal father of the universe, whose laws, like himself, are unchangeable.

I come now to my third general head, namely, to prove that God is good to all, in the universal care of his creatures, in the general course of his providence. But I shall not enlarge thereon, as every man's experience abundantly convinces him of this truth. The constant and invariable regularity of the seasons; the orderly succession of day and night; the fruitfulness of the earth; the different productions of the various parts of it, which produce those advantages that arise from commerce, and which supplies each other's wants; all declare the goodness, the universal goodness of the Deity: So that the *Psalmist* might well say, *the Lord is good to all, and his tender mercies are over all his works.* His sun rises with a genial warmth, and his rain descends in fruitful showers, on the just and on the unjust; the
evil,

evil, as well as the good, partake of his Bounty ; he opens his beneficent Hand, and supplies the wants of all his creatures ; every day's experience manifests his goodness, and every rising Sun opens a new Scene for wonder, gratitude, and praise.

Fourthly, and lastly, God is good to all mankind in the evils he permits to befall them ; which, in regard to sin, may be called *punishment*, but in regard to God, *goodness* ; being intended to reform and cure, and consequently to promote happiness.

If God could have no conceivable motive for bringing creatures into being, but to make them happy ; it naturally follows, that whatever he does, or permits to be done, in regard to them, must, upon the whole, have a tendency to promote that end. He has graciously connected virtue and happiness, vice and misery together. He has kindly made that our duty which is our greatest good. He has also implanted in the human mind pleasing and painful sensations, and made them the constant attendants on good and bad actions ; so that, in general, every virtuous person has a reward, and every vicious person a punishment, even in
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this world, from the approbation or reproach of his own mind. And this seems to be one of God's general laws, calculated to promote the happiness of his creatures ; for the pain, or evil, that arises from a remorse of mind, on every deviation from rectitude, is absolutely introduced by the abuse of our Liberty, and permitted by God to check us, and prevent our wandering further from the paths of virtue ; and in this his goodness most evidently appears ; that when we will not listen to the calls of reason and nature, and taste those pleasures that await a virtuous conduct, but are deaf to *the voice of the charmer* ; then a merciful God, as it were, lays thorns in our way, and makes the paths of vice rough and uneasy to us ; so that we have not only pleasure on the side of virtue to allure us ; but pain and disappointment lie in the road of vice to affright us back ; and these checks of conscience will *alone* be sufficient, while the mind is kept tender, and we attend to the voice of reason ; for (whatever some may assert of our being born in sin, and naturally inclined to vice) it appears to me, that every deviation from rectitude is a violence offered to our reasoning faculty, and

and the mind cannot give into it, without feeling (at least at first) that pain and remorse above spoken of. And this seems to me to be a method of dealing with creatures, worthy of infinite wisdom and goodness, and for which I doubt not, but the Lord and Governor of the universe will be eternally adored, as it must have a much greater effect on our conduct, than any *written law*, though it should contain promises and threatenings of *eternal life and death*.

Having now made it appear, that the pain and remorse we feel in our own Minds on a deviation from rectitude, is permitted in great goodness by the Deity; daily experience makes it more evident, that many bodily evils are also the consequence of vice, and so ordained to answer the same kind purpose. The great physician of our souls always proportions the remedy to the disease, and when lenitives fail, he proceeds to severer methods. He never withdraws himself from his creatures, but is always ready to receive the returning penitent. He does not permit evil, to revenge any affront offered to his majesty, for we cannot conceive that the actions of creatures can possibly affect or disturb the

repose of the all-perfect Deity. It appears
 therefore, that he has made it one of his
 settled laws, founded on eternal wisdom and
 rectitude, that the farther we deviate from
 virtue or fitness of action, the more and
 greater evil we shall certainly meet with
 in this or some other state of existence.
 And upon this principle I can easily suppose,
 that some beings, by a constant, uniform
 pursuit of virtue, by acting up to the digni-
 ty of their natures, by pursuing the dictates
 of unprejudiced reason, by adding one act
 of benevolence to another, and doing all in
 their power (in what ever state they exist)
 to promote the happiness of their fellow-
 creatures (I say, I can easily conceive, that
 such beings) may rise even to angelic excel-
 lence; while others by a contrary conduct,
 withdraw themselves from God, from per-
 fection and happiness, and sink by degrees
 into inexpressible pain, anguish, and remorse
 of conscience, till they are at last convinced,
 that they have egregiously mistaken the road
 to happiness, and a sorrowful repentance is
 produced in the mind. Then the rugged,
 thorny path must again be trodden back,
 with expiatory pain; but with this differ-
 ence

rence, (as encouragement is never wanting in God) that they will then have heaven in their view to cheer them; and as they approach towards perfection, those clouds that obscured the reasoning faculties, will by degrees disperse, heavenly wisdom beam forth upon their minds, and they will begin to taste that happiness, which an infinitely good God intended for them, and made the reward of virtue. Then they will clearly perceive, that *to be good is to be happy, and that angels are happier than men, because they are better.* I know it may be objected, that it is not always so in this world, where vice often seems to triumph over virtue, and the *wicked man* appears to *flourish like the green bay tree*, while the *good man* is humbled even to the dust. But as there is nothing we are so much mistaken in, as in the judgment we form of the happiness of others, the wicked man who appears to be happy, may, if we knew his mind, be the proper object of our pity and concern; and the virtuous man who is cheered and supported through the ills of life by a good conscience,

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be by far the happier of the two ; having this additional support, that the ills he feels will be of a very short duration. He considers that he is going an eternal journey, and that this world is but one short stage of it. And though the road may, from the wickedness of others, or from the unavoidable effects of natural causes, be rough and uneasy to him ; he stretches his imagination beyond it, and enjoys the prospect of a better state. So that upon the whole we may certainly conclude, that *evil* is the consequence of a deviation from rectitude, and permitted by the Deity to be so, consistent with that infinitely wise, and benevolent intention of his, namely to make his creatures happy. And this I am so well assured of, that I declare, could I be admitted to choose in an affair of this nature, I would prefer being under the afflicting hand of God, to that of his entire neglect of me, or to *annihilation* : well knowing, that while I remain in *being*, and feel those evils that God almighty permits to befall me, I remain the object of his kind regard ; and being confident, that the incessant, eternal resentment of the Deity,

against weak and finite creatures, is repugnant to all his attributes.

And notwithstanding this notion contradicts the opinion of many eminent divines, and the literal sense of many parts of *scripture*, it will appear from a few considerations, that eternal punishments are absolutely inconsistent with the perfections of that benevolent being, *whose tender mercies are over all his works*.

First, From the intention of punishment, which in God, is most certainly to reclaim, amend, and make happy; like the chast'ning of a kind and tender parent to his beloved offspring; which end is absolutely incongruous to, and inconsistent with *eternal punishment*.

Secondly, Let us consider how absolutely irreconcilable the *foreknowledge* and *mercy* of God will be, on the supposition of *eternal* punishments. Does God know when he brings me into being, that I shall act (though freely) so as to merit eternal sufferings; would it not have been infinitely more merciful in him, to have left me in a non-existent state? Let me appeal to any man of reason, who is not divested of every thing that is

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tender in the human frame, and ask him seriously this question : Was it supernaturally communicated to you, that if you should marry, you would have a child, who in the general course of his life would be extremely wicked, guilty of theft, murder, and the like atrocious crimes, and by the just sentence of the law, this child should be brought to a shameful and untimely end; would you not sooner live single all your days, and debar yourself of all the joys of the nuptial bed, rather than marry with a certainty of producing such an unhappy being? How much less then, would an infinitely good God who has no passions to gratify, no temptations to struggle with, bring a creature into being, whom he foreknew would be eternally miserable; when his only *conceivable* motive, for making him at all, was to make him happy?

Thirdly, If we consider farther, we shall find that there would be more *evil*, in punishing one single being to eternity, than could possibly be introduced by any number of evil agents, in a state of limited duration, even supposing they were each of them wicked enough to deserve as many years punishment,

nishment, as there are sands on the sea shore; because the difference between a limited and an eternal duration will still be infinite. How shocking then is it to suppose, that an infinitely kind and good being, would punish creatures eternally, for one act of disobedience, and that not their own, but the act of another person, many years before they were born, and consequently they could be no way consenting to? I say, how can we possibly conceive this would have been the case, even though *Christ* had never died to redeem us from it? I cannot see how the justice, or goodness of the Deity can be vindicated, on the supposition of *eternal punishments*, even for *voluntary* transgressions; though some will bring his justice as an argument for it. In a being who knows the exact measure of a crime, it would be *unjust* to punish without measure, or indeed one jot more than the crime deserves: but on the other hand, it would be no injustice in the Deity to pardon every sinner in the world; for who would be injured by it? not God, we are sure; God cannot be injured; and therefore, when we talk of his doing himself justice, we talk without ideas: From whence it is plain,
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that we run into great absurdities in regard to the justice of God, which in my opinion should come under the notion of goodness; for the suppositions of God's being injured, and of punishing out of revenge, are absolutely inconsistent with an idea of infinite perfection. Thus, I hope, I have proved, that the incessant, eternal resentment of the Deity, against weak and finite creatures, is absolutely inconsistent with his attributes. Yet let no one presume, from what I have here offered, to indulge in any one sin: For every deviation from the rule of right degrades the human nature, and sets it at a greater distance from perfection and happiness, and will certainly be attended with pain and remorse, either in this, or some other state of existence. Let the sinner know this and tremble; *that it is as impossible for God to make a being happy who continues in sin, as it is for him to lye, or act contrary to the rectitude of his nature.*

I come now to draw some inferences from what hath been advanced, in order to guide us on the road to happiness.

First, Is God then good to all, from this consideration, that he could have no conceivable

ceivable motive for bringing creatures into being, but to make them happy ; let us do all in our power to carry on this infinitely good design. Let us lay aside every mean and selfish view, and sacrifice, if necessary, our worldly advantages to the good of our fellow-creatures ; for such sacrifices will certainly be acceptable to God, and will render us more the proper objects of his favor, *than thousands of rams, ten thousands of rivers of oyl*, or the spilling the innocent blood of any creature that ever existed.

Secondly, Is God good to all from the discoveries he hath made of himself to intelligent beings ; let us do all in our power to enlighten, and improve our own minds, by a due use of our faculties in an honest enquiry after truth ; and also persuade others to this necessary duty ; that thereby we may dispel those mists of bigotry and superstition, that obscure the faculties of the mind, and render it incapable of any notions of God and religion besides those implanted by education : and as it is owing to mere accident, whether these are right or wrong, it is the indispensable duty of every one (as soon as reason, that ray of the Divinity begins to dawn forth in his mind) to

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divest himself, as much as in him lies, of every prejudice, to examine carefully the religion he professes, and see if there be any thing in it repugnant to the attributes of God, inconsistent with the reason and nature of things, or so mysterious that by the best use of his faculties he cannot comprehend it; for all such things as these should be given up, and accounted the *doctrines of men*. It is certainly inconsistent with infinite wisdom, as well as goodness, for God to require any thing as a duty of his creatures, which he has not enabled them to perceive the moral fitness and propriety of; as this would be requiring of *reasonable* beings, an unreasonable service. And such beings must be ever doubting, whether such doctrines or precepts came from God or not, even though they were found to be the writings of men whom they were taught to believe were divinely inspired.

The only *criterion* we have to judge any proposition by, is its *natural tendency*: And on a due examination, if we find the embracing and practising it will promote virtue in the human mind, make mankind wiser, more just, charitable, benevolent and happy, then we may be assured it is of God; for

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that wisdom, says St. James, which cometh down from above, is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy. But on the contrary, if it has not these marks, if it has not this tendency, we may be as sure, that whatever spirit dictated it, it was not the spirit of God, who never contradicts himself. and Christ himself lays down the same rules for us to judge of the principles of men by: Beware, says he, of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's cloathing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves; ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit, but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. And again, he says, Either make the tree good, and the fruit good; or the tree corrupt, and the fruit corrupt: for the tree is known by his fruit. As if he had said, how idle, how unreasonable, how inconsistent with common sense is it, for you to think that a man is influenced and guided by a bad spirit, whose constant and uniform practice is that of going about to do good? And this is the only method by which

we can judge of the purity of any man's principles: If we perceive, that in the general course of his actions, he expresses a proper dependance on the Deity, if he gratefully acknowledges the favour of God to him, and is patient under afflictions, if he is possessed of noble and generous sentiments, and is just, charitable and benevolent to all mankind; we may be as sure that he is moved by good principles, as we may that a tree must be good, which brings forth good fruit. But the misfortune is, we do not in general follow this rule prescribed by Jesus Christ; but are apt to make the principles we were educated in, the *criterion and standard of true religion*, and condemn all who differ from them. But let such remember, they would have made as zealous *Roman Catholics* or *Mahometans*, had that been the religion of their country, as they now do protesting christians.

I come now to make some improvement of my third general head, namely, the goodness of God in his universal care of his creatures. Is God, then, so benevolent to all, that the evil, as well as the good, partake of his bounty? Let us humbly imitate

him, by having the most universal, unbounded charity for all mankind. Let us not withhold the offices of kindness and humanity from our enemies, nor even from those whom we think are enemies to God: *If they hunger, feed them; if they thirst, give them drink. Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good.* And here I must observe, that the extending our good offices to our enemies, is all that can be meant in *scripture* by loving them; for *love*, strictly speaking, is an involuntary passion of the mind, arising from lovely objects, striking on it with irresistible force; and is as incongruous to a *command*, as *belief* is; and therefore neither of them could come from, or be enjoined by God: From whence I conceive, that passage in *scripture*, *he that believes not shall be damned*, might better be rendered, he that *examines* not shall be damned; though in this sense, the word *damned* is so extremely harsh, that I should not have used it but from such an example: And therefore, perhaps, it would best of all be rendered, he that examines not, or does not employ his faculties, in examining into the reality, propriety, and nature of such propositions

positions and things, as are peculiarly requisite for him to be acquainted with ; shall be self condemned, and lose all that rational pleasure and happiness, which would have resulted to him from a due use of his reason.

It is certainly out of our power to *believe*, without proper evidence to influence our belief ; and in like manner, it is as much out of our power to *love*, without perceiving something amiable in an object, on which to found that love. In either case, we might be hypocrites ; but the judgment would be still the same. From hence then let us learn, that no person is to be condemned, merely on account of his unbelief, who has made the best use of his faculties, in an honest and impartial enquiry after truth, and who has earnestly begged of God to assist him in these enquiries ; for this is doing all that a man has in his power to do. And an infinitely good God, who knows he hath made us with faculties very limited and confined, will require of us a conduct suited to the ability of perception and action which he has given us, and no more.

Let us leave it then to the great searcher of hearts, to deal with creatures as he pleases,
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and not arrogantly confine his mercy to any certain channel ; or presume to say, the belief of this or that particular doctrine is necessary to salvation ; for this is wresting the power out of God's hands, and prescribing limits to boundless mercy and goodness. I say, we should not dare to do this, though we should believe such doctrine to be the sense of the *scriptures*, and that the *scriptures* are the word of God ; because the evidence that fixes our *belief*, may not be sufficient to fix the *belief* of another ; and to *believe* without proper evidence, is unreasonable and absurd.

The only *conceivable* reason God could have for giving any law to his creatures, must be to induce a proper conduct ; to make them wise, virtuous, and happy, or, in other words, to lead them *to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly before him* : whoever then does this, whether from the *light* of nature, or from any written, positive law, must be equally acceptable to the Deity : for he answers the visible end of his creation, acts up to the propriety of nature, and attains that happiness, which an infinitely good God designed him for.

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Shall we then presume to denounce *vengeance*, the eternal vengeance of God on any man, because he *disbelieves* what we think to be the word of God? no, but rather let us consider that we are fallible, and may err in our opinions of particular texts of *scripture*; or that we may not have the *scriptures* themselves in that purity in which they were first wrote: because without doubt they have passed through the hands of translators who were fallible men, and might err either through ignorance or design: Add to this, the different opinions of the wisest and best of men in all ages about things of great importance in the *christian* scheme; such as *original sin*, *predestination*, the doctrine of the *trinity*, and the like. I say, let these considerations make us extremely cautious, how we determine in regard to God's dealings with our fellow-creatures, who differ from us in our religious sentiments. This we may venture to say, and (I think) no more; *that our happiness or miseries will ever depend on the propriety or impropriety of our actions; that the wicked will never escape punishment; and that the just, charitable, humane, benevolent man will*
never

never fail of his reward. But that God will punish for *unbelief* the honest enquirer, who has done every thing in his power to procure such evidence as might fix his *belief*, and yet cannot find it, is most certainly as repugnant to God's attributes, as light is to darkness.

As the author of the universe hath in his infinite wisdom and goodness formed the human mind with various faculties to distinguish *truth* and *falsehood*, and hath so modelled it, that nothing but apparent *truth* can possibly strike on it with force enough to gain its assent ; he certainly will appeal to those rational faculties, with regard to the fitness and propriety of whatever he requires of us ; for by these faculties only can we distinguish what comes from him, and what not. This is a method of dealing with rational beings, which (in my opinion) God, the fountain of all truth and fitness, never varies from : But if he ever should make use of other methods, as whatever he does is certainly right ; I say, if he should require any thing of his intelligent creatures, which by a due use of their faculties, they cannot perceive to be right, or fit to be required by him, he will do it in such a manner as will
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leave his creature no possibility of being mistaken ; he will acquaint him in some very awful or extraordinary manner, that though what he requires of him, contradicts one of his general laws, yet that it is *he himself* requires it : I say, if ever God does this (which can hardly be supposed) he will do it in some very *extraordinary way*, infinitely superior to any kind of deceit, incapable of the most distant imitation by men, and absolutely unlike any thing that a superstitious or *sickly* imagination can possibly paint.

All our *duty* then in regard to the belief of any doctrine or proposition, is candidly to examine it ; and he that believes any thing in religious affairs without examination, neglects the performance of a duty towards God ; but he who without prejudice or partiality does examine, and cannot find evidence sufficient on which to found his belief, cannot be culpable merely as an unbeliever. How shocking then is it to hear, even from the pulpit, *anathema's* pronounced against very good men, merely on account of their unbelief ! when it is as absolutely out of their power to *believe* what does not appear to

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them to be true, as it is for them really to love and account beautiful the most deformed and loathsome object in the world. Nothing therefore (as I said before) can be more incongruous to a *command* than *love* or *belief*. For how can we, without the vilest hypocrisy, say we believe that to be true, of which our faculties have no conception? As that proposition in *scripture*, where *Jesus Christ* is represented *begotten* by, or *proceeding* from the *father*; to which words if we annex any idea, it must be, *that the being who begets another, or that another proceeds from, must be prior to the being thus begotten or proceeding from*; and yet our salvation depends (according to the opinion of the christian church) on our *belief* of his being *eternally co-essential and co-equal* with the father; and that though the *Father, Son, and Holy Ghost* are three *persons* (to which words, if we annex any idea, they can mean no other than *three* distinct intelligent beings) yet they are not *three*, beings but one. I say, when these or such like propositions are offered for our belief; all that we can do, all that a good being can *require* of us to do, is to make the best use
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of our faculties in an impartial examination of them: If they appear to be true, we cannot withhold our assent; if not true, we cannot believe; and if we find them above the reach of our faculties, we can form no judgment about them, therefore neither *believe* or *disbelieve*; from whence our answer must be, *that we do not understand them.*

Thus, I think, it clearly appears, that *belief* can be no part of our duty. Let us, then, instead of denouncing vengeance on those who differ from us, not even indulge a doubt of their everlasting happiness, if they (in the general course of their actions) do that which is virtuous and praise-worthy. And let us not only *think* charitably, but act so likewise; extending our good offices to *all* without distinction; esteeming ourselves happy in every Opportunity we have of doing good, and thereby assimilating ourselves to that God *who is good to all, and whose tender mercies are over all his works.*

I shall now make one short observation on my last general head, namely, *the goodness of God in the evils he permits to befall mankind.*

Does God permit *evils* to befall mankind, out of kindness and tender mercy ; is it in order to make us wiser, better, and happier ; let us learn, then, at what an infinite remove all kinds of resentment and revenge must be from the Deity ; and let us endeavour, in this also, to be like him. Are we wounded with injuries ; soft words will, like an healing balm, begin the cure, and forgiveness will compleat it : But impatience will widen the wound, and a desire of revenge will keep it incurable. Let the punishments that we inflict, be always tempered with mercy, and ever intended to make the person better for the future ; unless, for the good of society, the taking away life be necessary.

I shall now conclude all with a serious exhortation to the discharge of all the duties we owe to God, and to our fellow-creatures.

Let us remember brethren, that nothing can possibly secure to us that happiness which the kind parent of the universe created us for, unless we are possessed of universal and unbounded charity, and in the general course of our actions do all in our power to

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promote the happiness of our fellow-creatures. If we would serve God, this is the only way, that with any propriety, we can be said to serve him; for our goodness extends not unto him, he gains nothing by our virtues, he loses nothing by our crimes. As he could have no other *conceivable* motive for bringing creatures into being, but to communicate happiness to them, if we contribute all in our power, to promote the happiness of our fellow-beings; we as it were assist in carrying on this benevolent scheme of the Deity, by such a propriety of conduct; and we may be assured my brethren, that without this, all prayers and praises are disregarded, all the sacrifices that can be offered will be rejected; and whatever dependance men may have on the mercy of God, or on the merits of any other being, nothing will render them the proper objects of the divine regard, nothing will secure men's everlasting happiness, but a steady pursuit of virtue. This is the road we are to pursue, and as long as we take calm and unprejudiced *reason* for our guide, we shall not mistake it, and we shall find *her ways to be ways of pleasantness, and all her paths peaceable and happy.* We shall have

have pleasure reflected back upon our minds, from every act of benevolence to our fellow-creatures, and shall enjoy even amidst a noisy, vain, disappointing world, that serenity and composure of soul, which God in infinite wisdom and goodness hath made the sure attendant on virtue : But if we forsake this road, if we leave this shining track, if we neglect the social virtues, and no longer follow the dictates of right *reason*, but depend on *forms and ceremonies*, on the merits of others, and on the belief of a certain set of principles, and think these sufficient to procure our happiness, we shall be egregiously mistaken.

Virtue, says Tully, is always virtue, adequately and entirely such, and holds a perpetual uniformity, a constant concurrence with the principles and dictates of right reason; and sin is nothing else but a deviation from rectitude, a crossing, as it were, upon a strait line. Let us then not only pursue the pleasing path ourselves, but do all we can to lead others into it. Let us, in charity to the souls of our fellow-creatures who are apt to be led by blind or false guides, point out to them the star of reason, that bright, resplendent

ent ray from heaven which will conduct
 them to happiness. Let us all in our several
 ways be eminent examples, not only of *be-*
nevolence and *charity* to mankind, but also
 of *piety* towards the undoubtedly true and
 only wise God. To address the sole presi-
 dent and sovereign of the universe in prayer,
 appears to me to be highly reasonable, being
 founded on the relation we stand in to him
 as his offspring, and though prayer may not
 alter the purposes of the Deity, or determine
 him to act differently from what otherwise
 he would have done (as he ever does, and
 will act agreeable to everlasting and invari-
 able rectitude) yet it appears *becoming* such
 creatures as we are, with the utmost re-
 verence and submission to his will, to ask
 those things, which in his infinite wisdom
 and goodness, he sees fit and convenient for
 us. But farther (and which alone should
 be sufficient to recommend it) the addressing
 God in prayer, *softens* and *improves* the
 mind for the discharge of social duties, and
 tends to make us more valuable members of
 the community to which we belong. By a-
 doring the majesty of heaven and earth, we
 are certainly humbled with a sense of our
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own unworthyness ; by acknowledging the divine goodness to us, a grateful temper is kept alive in our souls ; and when we beg of God the pardon of our sins, and the continuance of his favours to us, our minds are better disposed for granting the petitions of our brethren. Thus *humility*, *gratitude*, and *benevolence* towards our fellow creatures are strengthened and improved by our addresses to God ; and “ *though by prayer we do not draw God nearer to us, we draw ourselves nearer to him ;*” and by thus going on in the chearful and ready discharge of the Duties we owe to God and to our fellow creatures, we shall be prepared for all events : Death itself will not appear dreadful to us ; he will not be arrayed like a *king of terrors*, but as a messenger of peace, to conduct us into a better state of existence.



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